



Child and adolescent maltreatment as a mediator of continuity in callous-unemotional traits and low self-control[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Mediators fall into several different categories—social cognitive, perceptual, affective, and most recently, experiential. The purpose of the current investigation was to determine whether a putative experiential mediator (child and adolescent maltreatment) was capable of mediating temporal continuity in two variables that have traditionally been viewed as stable predictors of delinquency—namely, callous-unemotional (CU) traits and low self-control. Based on the assumption that CU traits and low self-control are significantly more predictive of delinquency than maltreatment, it was hypothesized that the past CU–future CU and past low self-control–future low self-control relationships would be mediated by child and adolescent maltreatment. This assumption and hypothesis were tested by prospectively cross-correlating maltreatment, CU traits, low self-control, and delinquency in 2034 children from the second cohort of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW II). Results indicated that CU traits and low self-control outperformed maltreatment in predicting delinquency, whereas maltreatment mediated the past low self-control–future low self-control relationship but not the past CU–future CU relationship. Further analysis revealed that the two pathways were significantly different from one another and that of the four individual paths examined, only the path running from CU traits to maltreatment failed to achieve significance. Hence, while child and adolescent maltreatment places a child at risk for low self-control and CU traits, only low self-control increased a child's odds of future maltreatment. These results have implications for both theory (reciprocal effects) and practice (delinquency prevention).

1. Introduction

Although a temporal relationship has been found to exist between child and adolescent maltreatment and juvenile and adult offending (English, Widom, & Branford, 2002; Hawkins et al., 1998; Maxfield & Widom, 1996; Widom, 1989, 2014), there is reason to believe that the strength of this relationship has been overstated. Studies indicate, for instance, that the maltreatment–delinquency connection weakens when demographic and family factors are controlled (Zingraff, Leiter, Myers, & Johnsen, 1993) and may only apply to certain types of maltreatment (e.g., neglect rather than physical abuse: Yun, Ball, & Lim, 2011). It has also been reported that the effect is weakest in more methodologically rigorous studies (Thornberry, Knight, & Lovegrove, 2012), such as when propensity matching is used to control for pre-existing differences between abused and non-abused individuals (Jennings, Richards, Tomsich, Gover, & Powers, 2013; Tomsich, Jennings, Richards, Gover, & Powers, 2017). Given that most maltreated youth do not go on to become juvenile delinquents or adult criminals (Stewart, Livingston, &

Dennison, 2008), it would make sense that additional variables are involved in the maltreatment–delinquency relationship. Two such variables are callous-unemotional (CU) traits (restricted affect, weak empathy, and lack of guilt) and low self-control (behavioral impulsivity, irresponsibility, and risk taking), both of which are core antecedents to delinquent behavior in criminal lifestyle theory (Walters, 2017c). The purpose of the current investigation was to determine whether child maltreatment, while being more weakly tied to delinquency than CU traits and low self-control, plays a role in the development of CU traits and low self-control.

Both callous-unemotional (CU) traits and low self-control have been explored as possible mediators of the maltreatment–delinquency relationship. Despite strong assumptions of stability by the originators of these constructs (Frick & White, 2008; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), moderate malleability has been observed in low self-control (Jennings, Higgins, Akers, Khey, & Dobrow, 2013; Ray, Jones, Loughran, & Jennings, 2013). Using CU traits as mediators, Carlson, Oshri, and Kwon (2015) discovered that these traits formed a link between child

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maltreatment and such behaviors as fighting, sex with strangers, and binge drinking. Kimonis, Cross, Howard, and Donoghue (2013) likewise noted that CU traits moderated the association between maternal care and aggression after controlling for childhood abuse and neglect. Although mediation was not directly tested in the Kimonis, Cross, et al. (2013) study, the results nonetheless showed that CU traits correlated with both maltreatment and delinquency-related behaviors. Investigating the relationship between maltreatment, low self-control, and dating violence using cross-sectional data provided by a group of college students, Gover, Jennings, Tomsich, Park, and Rennison (2011) discerned that low self-control correlated with both maltreatment and dating violence. In a second cross-sectional study, Kort-Butler, Tyler, and Melander (2011) ascertained that the relationship between maltreatment (physical abuse and neglect) and such negative social outcomes as criminal behavior, substance use, and deviant peer associations was mediated by low cognitive self-control. These results suggest that CU traits and low self-control are capable of mediating the maltreatment–delinquency relationship, although this conclusion rests heavily on cross-sectional data.

In nearly every mediational study in which maltreatment has been paired with CU traits or low self-control, child victimization has served as the independent variable and CU traits or low self-control have served as the mediator. Behaviors, however, particularly trait-like behaviors, do not ordinarily make the best mediators (Bandura, 1986; Wu & Zumbo, 2008). Cognitive, affective, and experiential factors, due, in part, to their greater malleability, serve as more effective mediators than behavioral factors. Previous research, in fact, suggests that social cognitive variables do a significantly better job of mediating behavior than behavior does of mediating social cognitive variables (Walters, 2016a, 2017b). To this end, psychological inertia, the process by which a cognitive factor mediates the relationship between past and future episodes of a specific behavior (e.g., crime) can be used to explain the consistency of behavior over time. As a case in point, both reactive criminal thinking (Walters, 2016b, *in press-c*) and weak self-efficacy to live a conventional lifestyle (Walters, *in press-b*) have been found to mediate continuity in criminal behavior. It may also be possible for maltreatment to promote behavioral continuity in CU traits and low self-control by means of a related process in which social cognitive mediators are replaced by experiential mediators like maltreatment. We might term this process experiential inertia.

It remains to be seen how much the severity, duration, and proximity of child maltreatment contribute to the delinquency-promoting effects of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse (Smith & Thornberry, 1995). The fact that maltreatment may achieve its effect indirectly via other variables suggests a role for proximity (Sampson & Laub, 1993) in understanding the maltreatment–delinquency relationship. In a review of the literature on this subject, Ford, Chapman, Mack, and Pearson (2006) determined that child maltreatment had a significant impact on a child's information processing and emotional regulation skills. According to Walters (2017c), problems with information processing contribute to CU traits and problems with emotional regulation contribute to low self-control. This may explain how childhood abuse can be linked to delinquency even though the two variables are only weakly correlated. The assumption upon which the current investigation was based held that child maltreatment would be more weakly associated with delinquency than CU traits or low self-control but that it would significantly mediate continuity in these two well-known antecedents of delinquency through a process of experiential inertia. Based on research showing that maltreated youth exhibit skill deficits that contribute to the development of CU traits and low self-control, it was reasoned that child and adolescent maltreatment is not only an outcome of CU traits and low self-control but a cause as well.

The research question addressed in this study was whether child and adolescent maltreatment is as capable of mediating continuity in CU traits and low self-control as reactive criminal thinking and weak self-efficacy are of mediating crime continuity (Walters, 2016b, *in press-a*,

in press-b, *in press-c*). Besides controlling for age, sex, and race, the current study also tested for moderation by sex based on prior research showing that the maltreatment–delinquency relationship may vary according to gender (Topitzes, Mersky, & Reynolds, 2011). Deviant peer associations and parental knowledge were also included as control variables given their potential role in shaping maltreatment (Kort-Butler et al., 2011; Malvaso, Delfabbro, & Day, 2016) and their theorized contributions to the development of CU traits and low self-control (Frick & White, 2008; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). To the extent that maltreatment is related to both CU traits (Kimonis, Fanti, Isoma, & Donoghue, 2013) and low self-control (Gover et al., 2011), it was hypothesized that child and adolescent maltreatment would be equally effective in mediating the past CU–future CU and past low self-control–future low self-control relationships after testing the assumption that CU traits and low self-control correlate significantly better with future delinquency than childhood maltreatment.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The sample for the current study consisted of children from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being—second cohort (NSCAW II: National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2014). These children were sampled from child protective investigations performed nationwide sometime between February 2008 and April 2008. Baseline data were collected between April 2008 and December 2009 and follow-up interviews were conducted 18 and 36 months after baseline. All data collection was completed by December 2012. There were 2034 (1002 boys, 1032 girls) members of the NSCAW II (age = 4 to 17), out of a total of 5872, who had non-missing data on more than half (i.e., 6 or more out of 11) of the variables included in the current investigation. Participation was restricted to these children in order to keep missing data to a manageable level. The ethnic breakdown of the sample was 39.4% White, 26.4% Black, 19.4% Hispanic, and 14.7% other. The most common caregiver respondent was the biological mother (62.8%), followed by the foster mother (9.6%), biological father (7.6%), grandmother (6.5%), aunt (3.4%), and adoptive mother (1.4%).

2.2. Measures

The independent and dependent variables for the current study were derived from the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991). The CBCL is a 112-item measure used to rate a child's behavior. Three items were selected as indicators of CU traits and three items were selected as indicators of low self-control based on a prior confirmatory factor analysis conducted on 2586 children from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth–Child (NLSY-C: Center for Human Resource Research, 2009) which showed good fit between this two-factor model and parental ratings on the six CBCL items (Walters, 2017a). The CBCL was completed by the child's parent or guardian using a three-point rating scale (0 = *not true*, 1 = *somewhat true*, 2 = *very true*). The mean inter-item correlations for the three callous-unemotional items (“Cruelty, bullying, or meanness to others;” “Doesn't seem to feel guilty about misbehaving;” “Lying or cheating”) was 0.50 at Wave 1 and 0.47 at Wave 3. The mean inter-item correlations for the three low self-control items (“Can't sit still, restless, or hyperactive;” “Impulsive or acts without thinking;” “Temper tantrums or hot temper”) were 0.45 and 0.42 for Waves 1 and 3, respectively.

The mediator variable was derived from the parent-child version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTSPC; Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998). The CTSPC was completed by the child and by the child's primary caregiver and covered the previous 12 months. Four scores were combined to create the child/adolescent maltreatment mediator variable used in this study: caregiver and child completed Physical Assault subscale scores (e.g., How many times did you hit or

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